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Re-Thinking Medieval Things

Ben Jervis

School of History, Archaeology & Religion, Cardiff University, John Percival Building, Colum Drive, Cardiff, CF10 3EU, UK.

jervisb@cardiff.ac.uk

ORCID: 0000-0001-5295-0647

Twitter: @bpjervis

I would like to thank the three commentators for their comments and, in reflecting upon them, take the opportunity to think about their implications for medieval material culture studies, particularly in the light of the increasing application of similar theoretical ideas by scholars working in the disciplines of archaeology, history and literature. A common theme which runs through my original paper and the three commentaries is that of dichotomies; between medieval/modern, consumption/subsistence, economy/religion and urban/rural, for example. The collapsing of such dichotomies has been a central theme of the application of non-representational approaches in archaeology, although typically these have been focussed on questions of human/non-human, material/culture or pre-modern/modern. The comments demonstrate quite how pervasive dichotomies are in the way that we think about the past and call on us to explore how these might be dissolved to open new areas for enquiry. In reflection, I wish to briefly discuss three of these dichotomies and also comment on potential methodologies which might help us to overcome them to build a more nuanced and realistic understanding of the medieval past.

Dissolving Dichotomies

In his work on the relationship between the mind and material culture, Lambros Malafouris (2013, 236) highlights the issue of structures and boundaries; ways of ordering knowledge have implications, revealing some things and masking others by imposing structure on how we experience the world, in our case how we encounter and deal with archaeological evidence. I started my paper by reflecting on the relationship between modernity and the medieval and all three commentators have identified this relationship as critical to our understanding of past experience. Paul Mullins emphasises my point that “the medieval does not simply function as a prelude to modernity”, and David Gary Shaw emphasises the “particularity of the historical moment”. Shaw goes further, identifying the way in which structures of knowledge become reified to “hide the labour and complexity of making things happen at all”. In dealing with the Middle Ages we must remember we are dealing with an arbitrary period of time, one which is defined more by what precedes and succeeds it than what occurred within it and one which varies in character considerably. This leaves us with a problem. To dissolve the dichotomy between medieval and modern would leave us without a scheme of periodisation, with no way to order the past. Alexander Murray (2004, 18) calls on us to “know about the past through the past”, highlighting that we can only understand the Middle Ages by understanding it in relation to the period which separates us from it, the early modern period. The answer then to dissolving this dichotomy is not to simply abolish the Middle Ages, but rather to think critically and relationally about what it is constituted of. Rather than seeking an evolutionary trajectory we should acknowledge that our understanding of the middle ages is formed through interventions into the medieval past, a folding of time, a revealing of fragments and relations, some of which persisted and some of which did not; to be alive to structures and boundaries and their implications. This is critical to the practice of medieval studies – by defining ourselves as medievalists we are creating boundaries and reifying structures which, if we are to make progress rather than reciting received wisdom and repeating clichés, we must be prepared to breach; to allow our mapping of evidential relations to resist structures and systems and reveal alternative ways of coming to know the world.

A second dichotomy is that between religion and economy. Mullins highlights my definition of medieval commercialisation not as a system but as a patchwork of relations, whilst Visa Immonen quite rightly comments on the omission of Christianity from my argument. We might trace this division back to the medieval tri-partite division (not a dichotomy, but a division with similar implications) between

those who fight (politics), those who work (economy) and those who pray (religion), with scholarship commonly focussing upon one of these rather than problematizing the relations between them. Immonen draws on recent work on personal devotion to remind us how both commercialisation and devotion saturated medieval life and, therefore, that there are inevitably relations between them. Here, again, I return to the idea of the enfolding of time and the working upon the medieval in the present. Deleuze and Guattari urge us to follow 'lines of flight', essentially to map relations as they reveal themselves. This has a critical implication for how we approach the material. We are, perhaps too quick to characterise ourselves as 'economic historians' or 'archaeologists of religion'; by doing so we are again imposing barriers and structures, reifying divisions and masking that overflowing of relations, the bleeding of economy, politics and religion into each other. By following lines of flight we can map these episodes of overflowing or de-territorialisation, and in doing so build an understanding of the medieval as revealed by relations and things rather than one which is constrained by a methodological straight-jacket.

A final dichotomy is that between consumption and subsistence. This is a central theme of my paper, and one which draws comment from all three discussants. It is an idea linked to the imposed distinction between medieval and modern, and one which might be perceived as false. Fundamentally, this is another case of boundary marking; between what we might perceive as necessary or unnecessary acquisition. But to impose such a distinction surely implies other boundaries, such as that between culture and subsistence. When put this way it seems to me that it is obvious that a sharp distinction between consumption and subsistence is not tenable as culture and subsistence are implicitly linked. Subsistence is more than food and clothing, as these staples of life are indivisible from cultural or social processes. Rather, as Martha Howell (2010) in particular argues, and as is supported by all three commentators, the evidence demands us to take a more nuanced approach which acknowledges the existence of contextually constituted forms of consumption which exist as a patchwork of relations (as bricolage), in which all material engagements both take place within a go on to constitute a particular social context.

It is, therefore, my contention that to progress study we need to pause and reflect upon boundaries. Rather than letting them delimit our research trajectories and, therefore, our interpretations we must not be afraid to let ourselves and our evidence wash over these distinctions, the medieval and modern do not need to be different. Whilst the material demands different methodological approaches, differences between pottery and metalwork should be revealed and not assumed. Although we may start off by studying religion or economy we must not be afraid to follow lines of flight, to allow ourselves and our evidence to become de-territorialised from our subject niche to reveal new connections; it is in this way that understanding is generated rather than knowledge reified as some form of objective, structuring truth. The question is, how to do this?

ANTs Assemble!

I have argued elsewhere (Jervis 2014) that Actor-Network Theory (ANT) offers a toolkit for exploring the relations between objects, places, people and documents in the medieval period and it is refreshing to see that similar approaches are being embraced by Shaw and other historians such as Katherine Wilson (2015) and scholars of medieval literature (Robertson 2008). In his comment, Shaw echoes Bruno Latour (1999, 19-21) in emphasising that ANT is not so much a theory but a method for mapping relations and tracing the emergence of agency. There is not space here to discuss the similarities and differences between Deleuze-Guattarian assemblages and ANT, and my focus is not on being wedded to either one or the other, but on picking tools which might help us to better reveal relations and understand their implications.

One area where these approaches are particularly valuable is in working across scales. Both ANT and assemblage theory reject the existence of society as prior to action, instead seeing it as the relationally constituted product of interactions. As such relations might resonate across scale (from the local to the regional or global) whilst relations may vary in strength or intensity. Immonen highlights the case of Finland to show that there is a great deal of diversity in material engagement across the medieval World.

Commerce here looks very different to that in the densely urbanised region of Flanders or parts of medieval England. Just as boundaries around our specialisms or periods are limiting, so too are geographical ones. An approach which generalises about commercialisation in medieval Europe is as limiting as one which focusses only on one region. By focussing on material relations and processes of de-territorialisation or overflowing, the adoption of ANT or assemblage approaches allows us to work between scales, to map local variation and, rather than generalising, equips us to explore linkages across scales, not simply by tracing the movement of goods but by understanding the constellations of relations into which these goods were drawn and the implications of these processes of assemblage. It is in such processes of mapping that we might reveal forms of consumption which persist into the early modern period or processes in which religion and economy bleed into one another.

Such a multi-scalar approach creates opportunities for us to revisit terms which occur in existing literature and unpackage their meaning as relational concepts. One such term is mass consumption; a term taken generally to imply the manufacture of identical commodities in a factory and a trait of the modern economy. But 'mass' is a relational term. Clearly medieval 'mass' consumption would be very different to that of the industrial revolution, however, if we define mass in relational terms, as a particularly intense form of repetitive material engagement, we can see how it might have a place within discourse on the medieval economy; how its meaning might be contextually determined as consumption and production are considered not in a narrow-minded subsistence framework, but in a way in which such intensity, such overflowing of relations, can be perceived of.

Shaw highlights the paradox of continuity and the presence of social structure within a framework in which such structures are emergent. This paradox is dealt with expertly elsewhere (Fowler and Harris 2015) but here I wish to make two points. The first is that ideas only persist because of the material manifestations of those ideas; be that their reification in text or their re-enactment through material engagement. Therefore archaeology is critical to understanding how structure persisted through the Middle Ages not as 'internalised' thoughts but as ideas emergent from, distributed through and made persistent by, material engagement (see Malafouris 2013). Secondly, the concepts introduced from assemblage theory, of coding and striated space, allow us to explore the implications of past actions on the future. We might perceive this as structure, but it is perhaps more accurate to view it as persistence brought about by multiple temporalities and the effects that these lingerings from the past have on constraining or enabling action in the future. Christianity, to build upon Immonen's point, is one such 'structure'; it is a set of ideas which is reified through religious text and ritualised engagements with material culture. As a structure it is not reflected by material culture but constituted by ongoing interactions with it, which, as Immonen argues, resonate beyond the sphere of religious life, bleeding into engagements which we might view primarily as commercial.

A Challenge

In reflecting upon both my own contribution and the comments upon it, it is increasingly clear to me that we need to rethink how we approach medieval material culture. For too long we have been constrained by reified boundaries and been afraid to embrace theoretical approaches which challenge them. Later medieval archaeology has struggled to embrace theoretical developments (Gilchrist 2009, 400), yet, if we embrace methodological potential we can progress medieval studies and make a contribution to material culture studies more widely. One way to do this is to focus not on objects as representations but to problematize human-object relations, to question what the implications of local interactions are and not to view the medieval world as prior-to-action, but rather as the product of engagements which may have begun in the distant past but continue into the present.

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